

Towards a Free Church Vision for Higher Education

Preamble

In 2014 the Free Churches Group (FCG) set up a Working Group 'to discern the most effective use of resources and best ways of equipping Free Church people to engage with Higher Education' (HE). The group submitted a Report to the FCG Directors in May 2015.

That Report contained a number of recommendations, which the Directors asked the Working Group to prioritise. The Group suggested that Recommendation 1 in the Report, 'That the FCG ... develops a statement expressing a positive vision for HE' was the number one priority, in the light of which other work could be done. Three other areas of work were suggested:

- (i) That the FCG engages with questions about the place of religion in universities in a way informed by FC principles and contemporary realities.
- (ii) That the FCG works with its member bodies to develop a strategic approach to chaplaincy and student work.
- (iii) That the FCG surveys its members to determine what issues their theological colleges face in the present HE context and what action the FCG might helpfully take to support the colleges.

This paper seeks to express the positive vision for higher education called for in Recommendation 1.

The Recommendation implies an 'internal' document, to be used by the FCG to help determine priorities in its work in HE. This statement is written as such; it could be adapted for wider, 'external', use.

The statement is based on FCG documents, referred to in Section Four of the Report, in particular the June 2010 report of the Free Church Education Committee (FCEC), *A Free Church Voice on Education* (<http://www.freechurches.org.uk/group/group.aspx?id=2299440>).

The Working Group recognised some of the issues it suggested for further work are complex and need careful thought. That may be particularly true of those to do with the place of religion on campus. The Group also affirmed that within Free Church history and beliefs are important resources for engaging with such issues.

Towards a Vision

1. The FCG and FCEC documents set out some key understandings of education, derived from Free Church (FC) principles. They are noted in bold, below, and developed in terms of HE.

Every Individual is Important to God

2. *A Free Church Voice on Education* expresses 'the belief that every individual is important to God' (p.3). This is a fundamental point which underlies all others. Biblically, it is expressed in terms of human beings being made in the image of God. That means all human beings are of inestimable

value. Whatever their material condition, sexual orientation, colour, culture or creed all carry the image of God and are important to God.

3. This means HE should seek to value individuals. Here are some things this will involve:
 - (i) HE institutions and their individual staff will so order their work that they do the best they can for each and every individual. That will include their students, helping them to realise as much of their potential as human beings as possible. It will also include a commitment to serve others, not part of the HE community, but who might benefit from the work HE does.
 - (ii) Institutions of HE will be places where individuals, with all their commonalities and differences, are respected. They will be places of freedom, but not licence.
 - (iii) Institutions of HE will be open to all who can benefit from HE. That includes on formal courses, but also means HE is about engaging with a wide range of conversation partners as it seeks truth and understanding.
 - (iv) HE institutions will offer care to all their members.

4. HE institutions work within a variety of policy frameworks (some specifically about HE, others, such as Equality legislation, for example, with broader applications). There is a need for such frameworks to support HE in its valuing of individuals.

The Education of the Whole Person.

5. *A Free Church Voice on Education* says (p.3) that 'The Free Churches are ... united by ... a concern for the education of the whole person.' It also says 'A Free Church voice recognises the importance of ... spiritual, moral, social and cultural development'. Importantly in the present HE policy context in England it adds 'Education needs to be broader than that which is measurable; it should enable individuals to live life in its fullness'.

6. Such points mean the formal and informal pedagogy and curriculum of the HE institution should be seeking the holistic development of students and staff. Here are some things that will involve:

- (i) Supporting individuals and groups in their exploration of and learning about our God-given world and life (activities not to be engaged in self-indulgently but which do have their own intrinsic value)
- (ii) Equipping people with skills for working and living
- (iii) Addressing questions to do with values, purpose and meaning
- (iv) Preparing students for living as individuals, in relationships, and in community as citizens; points returned to in the next section.

7. Doing such work effectively requires supportive funding and policy regimes.

Seeking the Kingdom of God

8. *A Free Church Voice on Education* says (p.3) 'The Free Churches' voice ... will speak the language of the Kingdom of God; it will speak of justice, integrity, equality, truth, freedom and peace for all. The source of these values is the Bible, in which the churches are rooted and grounded.'

9. The Bible speaks of a liberating God who gives freedom to those God has created. It speaks of a God of *shalom*, concerned for the right ordering of society, the liberation of the oppressed, and who calls for repentance and a seeking of the new life seen in Christ. For Christians, life lived fully is life lived in tune with the rhythms of God in creation. It is life lived towards the coming Kingdom of God.

10. In a diverse society not all will share the theology expressed above; nor is it appropriate for the state to prioritise support for one faith position. Nonetheless, society does have urgent issues to face to do with, for example, justice, peace, living with difference, and living well with the natural world. Society therefore needs HE which will address such issues, for example through research and through equipping students to live as citizens in such a world, including that such values may be dispersed and embedded within society.

11. Such points are well in line with long-held views about HE; that it is to do with cultural formation, citizenship, the nature of society and the seeking of the public good. As the 1997 Dearing Report 'Higher Education and the Learning Society' put it, universities are 'to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society'.

12. To do that, universities will need to draw on diverse sources of wisdom. That means there is a need for a diverse curriculum. Within that diversity, theology and religious studies will be seen as important by Christians for their own faith-based reasons, and, more broadly, because religion is hugely significant in shaping individuals and societies, for good or ill.

13. The FCs will also be concerned that there is space not just for theology but for other expressions of religious faith within HE, including prayer, worship and other means of learning to live with God and by God's ways. How to make appropriate use of religious sources of wisdom in a diverse society is an important question, relevant both to this and the last point, and not to be ignored.

14. Again, it is important that funding and policy regimes support HE in being about the good of society and individuals.

A proper secularism

15. *A Free Church Voice on Education* says 'A Free Church voice must resist secularism and encourage the use of Christian language in education, particularly the vocabulary of hope' (p.3).

16. Whilst there are unhelpful secularisms which seek to remove religion from the public square, there are other understandings of the secular and secularism which accord with FC tradition and which suggest the public realm (including, in this case, the realm of higher education) should be a place where faith, and a diversity of faiths, are welcomed. That view is expressed in *A Free Church Voice on Education* when it says 'The FCEC is committed to upholding respect for religious faith, of whatever creed, and the right of an individual to hold that faith, whilst recognising its own rootedness in the Kingdom of God.'

17. The FCG will clearly wish to see religion taken seriously in HE, with freedom for many expressions of religious faith, and other world-views. It will do so recognising the realities of a diverse, divergent and, at times, divided society in which difference can bring both enrichment and pain.

18. It is important that law and policy are creative of peaceable diversity as well as containing of those who would abuse such freedoms. As said in the preamble, the Working Group recognises there are difficult and complex issues here, into which Free Church traditions and perspectives offer a rich resource.

Inclusion

19. *A Free Church Voice on Education* says: 'The Free Churches speak from an inclusive perspective ... In the belief that every individual is important to God, a Free Church Voice, silenced in the past by discrimination and inequality, must speak for those who are disadvantaged because of difference.'

20. HE should be an inclusive activity, listening to and conversing with those who are not usually listened to or conversed with, opening the doors of HE to those who can benefit but have not traditionally been admitted, hearing and addressing the diversity of views present in society, be those views comfortable or uncomfortable (including to the Free Churches), offering support to those who are discriminated against or disadvantaged.

21. Policy and funding should seek such an inclusive HE sector.

The Search for Truth

22. This is not something mentioned in *A Free Church Voice on Education*, or other documents from the FCG we have examined. Searching for truth does, however, seem fundamental both to education and being Christian, and so we add it here. We note that for some at least, both today and perhaps more so in the past, the motivation for research in many areas, including the scientific, has been to discover the truth about God's world and, ultimately, God.

23. Christianity contains a call to live well (lovingly) in the world as it is, towards the coming Kingdom of shalom. Doing that involves seeking the truth about how the world is and, in the light of that truth, discerning what the call of God involves.

24. Within Christian thinking there are close relationships between truth, love and freedom. To discover anything of the truth about God is to discover something of love. In such truth and love are freedom. Not all education will embrace such a theology, but in seeking truth and embracing the sorts of values mentioned in paragraph 10 it will be an advocate for freedom.

25. Many within higher education who do not share specifically Christian perspectives will share the commitment to searching for truth, including that people and societies might be free. It is a driver of the impulse to explore, discover, research and pass on what is gained through those activities.

26. Policy and funding should be supportive of universities as places where truth is sought.

In summary.....

27. The FCG wishes to see an HE sector which:
- Does its best for all members of society, including students.

- Seeks the holistic development of students
- Seeks the justice, peace and well-being of society
- Embraces a variety of wisdoms, including those gleaned through theology and religious ways of knowing
- Gives space for people of faith to express their faith
- Is geared towards including and serving those who are excluded, disadvantaged and discriminated against.
- Is an advocate for freedom

The Higher Education Working Group
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